



Factsheet 4: **Language**



We know from our previous research that psychological barriers are the most significant in preventing disabled people from being active. Language can act as a barrier when it is negative and misrepresents disabled people and their lives. Negative language can also create stigmas and disempowers people.

Sports organisations like yours should use positive language and terminology to help attract more disabled people to your organisation and hopefully encourage more to be active for life.

Planning: Create an inclusive communications policy

The best way to embed inclusive communications across your organisation is to develop an inclusive communications policy that clearly sets out your commitment to inclusion. In order to develop your policy, involve internal and external stakeholders.

The length and complexity of your policy will be determined by the size and scope of your organisation. If you are a small, local or regional organisation you might simply have a short statement on accessibility and inclusion on your website.

There are two schools of thought or **'models'** of disability, the social model and medical model. The social model of disability says that it is the barriers in society, such as inaccessible buildings or people's attitudes, that create disability. When those barriers are removed,

disabled people have choice, control and independence in society. Disabled people developed the social model of disability because the medical model did not explain their lived experience of disability or help to develop more inclusive ways of living.

You should base your policy on the social model of disability because it empowers disabled people and encourages non-disabled people and organisations to be more inclusive. By removing 'barriers' we remove the disability. For more information on the social model of disability visit: www.scope.org.uk

If you are working for a larger, national body you could reasonably be expected to have a more detailed policy in place. Your policy can include guidance for internal and external stakeholders about using appropriate and positive language.



Collective terms and labels

The word 'disabled' is a description not a group of people. Use **'disabled people'** not **'the disabled'** as the collective term. Many deaf people whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL) consider themselves part of **'the deaf community'** - they may describe themselves as **'Deaf'**, with a capital D, to emphasise their deaf identity.

Avoid medical labels. They say little about people as individuals and tend to reinforce stereotypes of disabled people as unwell or **'patients'**. Don't automatically refer to **'disabled people'** in all communications - many people who access disability benefits and services don't necessarily identify with this term. Consider using **'people with long-term health conditions'** if it seems more appropriate.

Use plain English

English is the most commonly spoken language in the UK, but there are many people who don't speak English as their first language. Communications that are clear and use plain English will benefit not only someone with a learning disability, but someone whose first language is not English.

Everyday phrases

Most disabled people are comfortable with words and phrases used to describe daily living. People who use wheelchairs **'go for walks'** and people with visual impairments may be very pleased - or not - **'to see you'**. Having an impairment may just mean that some things are done in a different way. However, common phrases that may associate impairments with negative things should be avoided, for example **'deaf to our pleas'** or **'blind drunk'**.



'blind drunk'



'go for walks'



Positive not negative language

Some terminology is trickier than others. There are some terms that are more accepting by disabled people. However, it is always important to ask before comparing one person with another with the same impairment.

Do use 	Do not use 
Disabled person or people with impairments/ health conditions	The disabled, handicapped, crippled
Person or non-disabled person	Able-bodied person, normal person
Dwarf, person of short stature, person with a restricted growth condition	Midget
Person with a certain condition or impairment	Sufferer
Wheelchair or mobility-scooter user	Wheelchair or mobility-scooter bound or confined
Learning disability or person with an intellectual impairment	Retarded, backwards, slow, mentally handicapped
Deaf people/hearing impaired person, Blind people/visually impaired person	The deaf The blind
Brain injury	Brain damage
Has [name of condition or impairment]	Afflicted by, suffers from, victim of [name of condition or impairment]
Mental health problem/issue	Mental

Appropriate language and tone in sport

Consistency in language used is essential, particularly when referencing a sport's conditions or technical classifications. If possible, when interviewing or profiling a disabled athlete, writers should consult the person on how they should refer to their impairment or condition. While it is important to write tactfully on sensitive subjects, writers and sports organisations should not be afraid to refer directly to the athlete's impairment when required.

This is particularly relevant when writing a feature story or press release on the athlete's back-story and journey. Feedback from interviews with disabled adults who have an interest in sport and physical activity highlights the need to ensure that language used is not patronising. But it's also important that it does not skirt around referencing the impairment directly if it is relevant to the storyline.





Key points

- Create an inclusive communications policy
- Use positive not negative language
- Remember key words to use and avoid
- Think about appropriate language and tone in sport
- Use plain English

Resources and further information

Our **Inclusive Communications Guide** can provide you with further advice on how to use positive language and terminology. Available on our website.



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This document is available in Word format. Please contact us if you need support. Activity Alliance is the operating name for the English Federation of Disability Sport. Registered Charity no. 1075180

